

Superintendent of Lighthouses Dwelling  
United States Coast Guard Base  
La Puntilla Point  
San Juan  
Puerto Rico

HAER No. PR-20

HAER  
PR,  
7-5434,  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
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# HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

## Superintendent of Lighthouses Dwelling

PR-20

Location: At the United States Coast Guard Base, La Puntilla Point, San Juan, Puerto Rico

Date of Erection: ca. 1908-12

Owner: U.S. Department of Commerce  
U.S. Coast Guard

Present Use: Unoccupied

Significance: No conclusive evidence has been found about the construction date of the Lighthouse Superintendent's Dwelling, also known as QS 1 (at the U.S. Coast Guard San Juan Base). The Real Estate Records of the U.S.C.G. Commander's Office, 7th U.S.C.G. District (copies of which are filed at the U.S.C.G. San Juan Base) do not contain explicit information either about (1) a final and legal description of the property as such or (2) of the man-built environment QS 1.

The Dwelling is located on the eastern bank of La Puntilla Point, contained within the San Juan Historic District a property included in the National Register of Historic Places.

The entire area was part of the old U.S. Naval Reservation of San Juan. A section of this area became the Puerto Rico Lighthouse Depot through the 26 January 1912 Presidential Proclamation. By 1921 the new area's name had been changed to "Lighthouse Reservation at La Puntilla" at La Puntilla Point (v. attached drawing #3102). One should notice that the 1921 drawing is based on a 1912 Depot drawing. The Depot drawing was signed by Lighthouse Superintendent J.P. Dillon and surveyed by the Corps of Engineers. One should also keep in mind that through a 1903 Presidential Proclamation, all Spanish lighthouses in Puerto Rico, with a certain acreage of surrounding land, had become U.S. property.

By 1903 the U.S. Naval Reservation already existed as U.S. property. A deteriorated plan drawing of the Naval Reservation dated 1903 or 1908 at the General Archives of Puerto Rico

(San Juan; Obras Publicas: Maps y Planos) poorly reveals the existence of a structure, more or less, at the same site where the 1912 Lighthouse Depot drawing locates the Superintendent's Dwelling. The existence of the structure is further confirmed --already altered-- by a 1921 photo. The photo shows a building on the same location as the 1912 drawing. Considering all these questions in toto, the approximate construction date can be established between 1908 and 1912, notwithstanding that it can reservedly but safely be traced to the period 1903-1908.

The 1912 drawing shows a one-story structure with a veranda --and possibly a covered porch-- on the south and east facades. This is, apparently, the earliest form of the building and most basic. By 1921 it had been altered as depicted in the 1921 photo: a two-story house surrounded by two covered porches, a hip roof, wide windows and doors, resting on a garden partially surrounded by a stone wall which is still in existence. It excellently reveals important elements of architectonic value that characterized the 1910's and 1920's U.S. Government official "hacienda style."

The style is not indigenous to Puerto Rico; rather it reflects a U.S., possibly southern, taste for sprawling structures, covered long porches and outer corridors, and projecting roofs sustained by classic columns, in this particular case, neo-doric. This style is further developed in the 1925 photo (also in the 1928). These present a period of alterations which nevertheless were deeply inbeded in the 1910's structure. The only extant drawing of the building known to exist is dated 1945, which confirms the 1925-1928 design, and reflects accurately the present location. The drawing depicts the dwelling resting on a podium with main facade facing south (as in the 1912 Depot drawing). Five steps lead to a gallery (also as in the same drawing) already tiled as it stands today. The gallery is approximately 9 ft x 11 ft x 182 ft and encircles the entire first floor. The actual SW corner of the gallery is a screened porch forming a secluded section from the rest of the balcony further segregated by a reinforced concrete parapet. Eighteen doric columns sustain

the second floor gallery which also serves as ceiling for the first floor balcony.

The main first floor balcony door opens to an ample rectangular hall --approximately 31 ft x 8 ft-- that divides the first floor into two equal sections. The stairway to the second floor and a small bathroom are located in the NE part of this hall. East of the hall a living room and library form a nave --approximately 31 ft x 15 ft-- with a door and window on the S facade, 3 windows on the E facade, and another door and window on the N facade. Opposite the living room, a dining room --approximately 15 ft x 15 ft-- opens to the S gallery through a door and window and to the W facade by way of 3 windows. The NW corner of the house is formed by the kitchen and pantry --approximately 15 ft x 15 ft-- with a door and window to the N gallery, and two more windows to the W gallery.

The second floor has four bedrooms. The master is located in the SW corner--approximately 15' x 15' --opening into the second floor hall --approximately 20' x 8'. The master bedroom has one door and a window that give onto the S gallery and two windows onto the W gallery. It connects with the master bathroom--approximately 15' x 7' --which itself opens into another bedroom--approximately 15' x 8'. The eastern section of the second floor is formed by two bedrooms that open into a common bathroom. Both second floor bedrooms follow the first floor window-door arrangement. The second floor opens to the S gallery by way of a door directly above the main first floor entrance. The second floor gallery is enclosed by a parapet on which 18 columnar shafts sustain the roof. These are located directly over the neo-doric columns of the first floor. The flat roof is constructed of three-ply lead and copper sheeting.

The exterior decorative elements are sparse. The slightly fluted columns on the first floor rest on a simple doric base and plinth with unadorned capital. A projecting eave on the second floor directs rain away from the galleries. The second floor parapet is decorated with protruding plaster rectangles enclosed by the handrail and the rectangular shapes which act as the shaft bases.

The interiors are as simply decorated as the exterior; they are fundamentally functional. All windows and doors are double. The windows are made up of two interior wood and glass panels and two exterior louver ones. The doors follow a similar arrangement: interior French style doors, a central screen, and exterior louver panes.

The bathrooms reflect the 1920's taste for patterned ceramic tiles in combined colors--purple-brown and beige.

Both floors are built of reinforced concrete walls--including the galleries and first floor deck--and interior plastered wooden frames, where metallic mesh is used even on the ceilings.

The reinforced concrete sections of the building are still sound. Some wood areas are termite infested. Plaster and metal mesh has fallen in some areas as a result of indiscriminate replastering. (Some fallen pieces have 2 1/2" to 3" of cement plaster attached to the metallic mesh).

The building and surrounding gardens represent one of the few extant, although altered, architectural examples developed in Puerto Rico shortly after the War of 1898. Its "hacienda style" was introduced in Puerto Rico by the U.S. Government and adapted to the Island's environmental demands. The style developed into one where buildings had unimpaired air circulation, wide spaces, maximum use of daylight, and leisure movement--an interesting reminder of the Spanish lighthouse provisions for keepers living quarters. This type of structure was generally built for high-ranking public or civil servants or military personnel who held political and administrative key positions after the 1898 change of governments.

Furthermore, the dwelling and its gardens are located at the entrance of San Juan Harbor, surrounded by 50 year old ficus, palm, acacia, flame, citrus and banana trees. It is the only extant green area in the Historic District outside Morro Castle.

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Finally, the dwelling became the residence and living quarters of the master lighthouse keeper after the U.S. took over Puerto Rico and the old Spanish Lighthouse System.

Transmitted by:

Kevin Murphy, Historian HAER, August 1984; from the National Register Nomination prepared by Dr. Benjamin Nistal-Moret, August 1979.